

## Meet Jesus...Again: 4. Do you still not understand?

Mark 8:13-21

March 31, 2019

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Although the title of this series is “Meet Jesus,” as we read through the Gospel of Mark, we are also meeting the disciples. One of the reasons that I know what Mark has written is true is what he says about the disciples. Remember, as far as we know, Mark never met Jesus. He was the traveling companion and interpreter for the Apostle Peter. Mark listened to what Peter told him about the three years that Peter spent with Jesus, and at a time of urgency following the execution of Peter and Paul and many other leaders in the church in Rome and the genocide that took place in Israel, Mark wrote this book. And the picture he gives us of the disciples is not a glowing portrait of heroic efforts. They were far from perfect, often bumbling and stumbling their way along this path that Jesus was taking and at every turn they don’t seem to understand who Jesus was or what he was communicating. If it was me instead of Peter, I would have made sure to communicate that I was the one who got it right – but that’s not the picture we are given of the disciples. I think Mark wants us to see ourselves in the disciples.

Like everyone else who encountered Jesus, the disciples were amazed by Jesus’ power. But that power was not for the purpose of making Jesus into a kind of superhero – but to bring change, to transform lives, from inside out. That’s how the Kingdom of God would enter this world. This transformation would require a change of thinking. It’s what the apostle Paul would write to the Christians in Rome. **Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.** (Romans 12:2) It’s not just a change of heart, but Jesus wants to change your way of thinking.

One of our members gave me a copy of a book on leadership that was co-written by his son-in-law. In the introduction of the book (*How Goodness Pays*), Paul Hillen describes how his work history for some of the largest corporations in America was filled with success. He was someone who paid attention to the bottom line and got results even if it meant he was ruthless in how he led his teams. But then he describes a turning point that changed his way of thinking. Two weeks after his son sustained a serious sporting injury, he passed the CEO of the company who was late for a meeting. And as they passed in the hall, the CEO asked, “How’s your son?” which surprised Paul because he did even know that the CEO knew about his son’s accident. Knowing the CEO was running late, he kept walking as he said, “Don’t worry, you look late for your meeting.” But to his surprise, the CEO stopped, turned around, and said, “No really, how is he doing?” That moment became the “aha” that caused him to rethink the way he had been working with people. Maybe relationships matter. And that led him into a new way of thinking where he invested in the lives of the people around him which turned out to have a positive impact on the bottom line. When his way of thinking changed, his whole life and what was truly important changed.

I can still hear my mother saying, “If I told you once, I told you a hundred times.” And fortunately, she kept telling me because either I wasn’t paying attention or I really didn’t understand. And as often as the disciples failed to understand, Jesus did not give up on them. Somehow Jesus could see the potential that they had even when they kept missing the point in what Jesus was doing. If the disciples didn’t understand, even after three years with Jesus, there is hope for us. We are all a work in progress, and some days it is one step forward and two steps back. Even our best intentions can fall flat. The overarching definition of the disciples is misunderstanding.

Thus far in the Gospel of Mark, the 12 disciples have been following Jesus, traveling from town to town – sometimes to places they never would have gone on their own, but everywhere they go they see the good Jesus was doing and the enthusiastic crowds. There was the time he fed 5000 in Galilee with just 5 loaves and 2 fish, and then in chapter 8, they' are again traveling in Gentile territory attracting a crowd of 4000 Gentiles, and Jesus was able to feed them with just 7 loaves of bread. They have just crossed back to the Jewish side of the lake, when the Pharisees show up. They have been watching. They saw where he was coming from, and they are waiting. And the Pharisees **began to argue with Jesus. To test him, they asked for a sign from heaven. With an impatient sigh, Jesus said, "Why does this generation look for a sign?"** Haven't you been paying attention? If I've showed you once, I've shown you a hundred times! Everything I've been doing has been a sign. Heaven has come to earth. The kingdom of God is breaking in. And you can't see that? The Pharisees are just as clueless as the disciples.

So once again, Jesus gets into a boat with the disciples. It reminds of the times we would take a car trip with our children. Those times in the car led to some of the best conversations. But just like our car trips, it wasn't long until the disciples start arguing about the food. They don't have enough of it. They have one loaf – and somehow that's not enough. Already, they've forgotten what Jesus could do with 7 loaves of bread. He's right there with them, and they don't understand. Jesus says: **Watch out and be on your guard for the yeast of the Pharisees as well as the yeast of Herod.** What's he saying? Yeast is the leavening agent that causes dough to expand and gives us bread. Jews used yeast to make bread except at Passover. To remind them of the time when they were in such a hurry to flee slavery in Egypt and didn't have time to wait for the bread to rise so instead they made unleavened bread. Jesus mentions yeast, not to warn them about the wrong sort of bread but to warn them of the wrong sort of kingdom. The Pharisees want God to set up a kingdom for their benefit – so they can observe the law with all its strictness. But that's not the vision that Jesus has. Remember how Jesus went to the other side of the lake, the Gentile side, to be with Gentiles and he just fed a crowd of 4000 Gentiles. And Herod? He wants God to establish his family as the true the king of Israel. The Pharisees and Herod are looking out for their own interests. They want God to give them what they want and in the process a whole generation is missing the sign.

Mark wants us to hear: there's no time for yeast. This is urgent. The hostility to what Jesus was doing was growing. Herod had already killed John the Baptist. The Pharisees were already plotting the demise of Jesus. What Jesus was doing was in conflict with the prevailing message of the Pharisees and Herod. Jesus is more than a healer, a miracle worker, a prophet – and everything he has been doing has been pointing to who he is. Look at all the evidence. **Don't you have eyes? Why can't you see? Don't you have ears? Why can't you hear? Don't you remember? When I broke five loaves of bread for those five thousand people, how many baskets full of leftovers did you gather?" They answered, "Twelve." "And when I broke seven loaves of bread for those four thousand people, how many baskets full of leftovers did you gather?" They answered, "Seven." Jesus said to them, "And you still don't understand?"**

The disciples had front row seats to the most amazing miracles. They saw it. But they missed what was happening. And here they are in a boat, looking for more bread to fill their stomachs, when right there with them was the bread of life that would get God's kingdom into them. It is easy for us to misunderstand if we are not looking beyond the immediate. Crowds of people came to Jesus to get what they wanted. The Pharisees and Herod knew what they wanted God to do for them. And the disciples are arguing about wanting more bread. And we want God to give us what we want, don't we? But, what does God want? Doesn't Jesus have a purpose that is greater than continually showing up to give us what we want?

We read about the times that Jesus went off by himself to pray. Somehow, I don't think Jesus was asking God to give him what he wanted but to be the person that God wanted him to be. Every morning, that's my prayer. It is a hard prayer to pray. "God, I give my life to you. Show me what you want me to do." That's the transformative, the inside/out prayer. To change my way of thinking. But sadly, most days, I'm only a few minutes into the day and I'm so caught up in what I need to get, to go, to achieve, to attain, to acquire that I slip into "God give me what I want." And I miss it – how everything Jesus was doing was for a purpose. Everything Jesus does in me is for a purpose – to get into my life so that God can work through my life. But the Good News is that God does not give up on us. The very next thing that happens in Mark chapter 8 is that Jesus restores sight to a man who has been blind since birth. So keep looking, don't miss the signs.

Years ago, I served as a youth pastor. Those years as a youth pastor gave me some of my greatest failures and most startling discoveries. I think we would all learn a lot about ourselves if we spent at least two years of our lives working with teenagers. I remember one evening when I came up with this idea that we would practice random acts of kindness. The youth were divided into teams. Each team had a driver. Each team was given \$10 and for the next hour and a half they were to do random acts of kindness in the community. I stayed at the church by the phone just in case something happened and someone decided to call the church. When a group did an act of kindness, they were supposed to leave a card so people would know this was church business and not just a bunch of kids messing around. The groups did things like bagging groceries at the grocery store and carrying the groceries to the cars. They washed windshields at a gas station. They paid the parking for strangers. They bought movie tickets and gave them away. One group went into a pizza shop, bought a pizza, and then delivered it to someone they did not know.

When the groups returned to church they were full of enthusiasm. It was an amazing spiritual experience. We celebrated the ways we were able to work for God and how God was working in us through these experiences. I remember one youth said to me: "I wish it was like this all the time." Somehow I think Jesus was saying the same thing. The next morning, I was at my desk when the receptionist came into my office and said someone was calling about some youth that were doing some things in her neighborhood last night. "Will you take the call?" she asked. My first thought was "oh-oh" what didn't the kids tell me about last night. So I took a deep breath, and I picked up the phone. The voice on the other end asked, "Are you the pastor?" "One of them," I said tentatively. "When that group tried to help me last night I didn't want their help. It's not what I expected from teenagers. It's not what I expected from a church. Can you tell me more about your church? I think I need your help after all."

When we are paying attention - When we let the presence and power of Jesus into our lives and carry the bread of life into the world, God will work through us. Don't miss that. God wants to get into your life so that God can work through you with the bread of life.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 31, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** Holy God, we come before you as people in need of what you offer. Too often, we settle for the food that will satisfy our immediate hunger while overlooking the bread of life that you offer. Would that we could see beyond our limited understanding of what we need and be ready to be transformed by what you know that we need. Create a yearning in our hearts for you and the desire to walk in your ways. We ask your forgiveness, and we ask to be made whole in you. Amen.

## **Divine affirmation: Jesus was right about a suffering Messiah**

**Monday, April 1**

### **Scripture: Mark 8:34-9:13**

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels.” Jesus continued, “I assure you that some standing here won’t die before they see God’s kingdom arrive in power.”

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it’s good that we’re here. Let’s make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead. So they kept it to themselves, wondering, “What’s this ‘rising from the dead’?” They asked Jesus, “Why do the legal experts say that Elijah must come first?” He answered, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. Why was it written that the Human One would suffer many things and be rejected? In fact, I tell you that Elijah has come, but they did to him whatever they wanted, just as it was written about him.”

**Observation:** This dazzling transformation experience with Moses, Elijah, God’s voice—seeing Jesus glorified left Peter, John and James speechless. Jesus usually looked like just another person. On this day, “his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white.” This was not a random light show. It was a preview of God’s kingdom arriving in power (Mark 9:1), a time to strengthen Jesus and his disciples to face the cross (the completely counter-intuitive path to the kingdom).

**Application:** Peter said they should stay on the mountain and build three shrines. Mark said Peter’s foolish suggestion came “because he didn’t know how to respond.” But Jesus led them off the mountain, to the hurting people waiting for him. Are there times, in worship or at a beautiful site, when you wish you could just stay there? What forces lead you back into the “real world”? How can you keep God’s presence with you, even off “the mountaintop”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, so often I just want you to listen to my plans, my wishes, my dreams. Grow in me a spirit willing to obey the divine command: “Listen to him!” Quiet my demands and wishes when I need to listen to you. Amen.

**I have faith; help my lack of faith!**

**Tuesday, April 2**

**Scripture: Mark 9:14-29**

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John approached the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them and legal experts arguing with them. Suddenly the whole crowd caught sight of Jesus. They ran to greet him, overcome with excitement. Jesus asked them, “What are you arguing about?” Someone from the crowd responded, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn’t allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn’t.” Jesus answered them, “You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me.” They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been going on?” He said, “Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!” Jesus said to him, “‘If you can do anything’? All things are possible for the one who has faith.” At that the boy’s father cried out, “I have faith; help my lack of faith!” Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, “Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again.”<sup>26</sup> After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose. After Jesus went into a house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we throw this spirit out?” Jesus answered, “Throwing this kind of spirit out requires prayer.”

**Observation:** In the first century, most of today’s medical and psychological insights into human pain didn’t exist. People called nearly all inexplicable ills—like the probable case of epilepsy reported in today’s reading—“demon possession.” (Note that in this story, the “demon” didn’t speak at all, unlike in many of the other demon confrontations). The father’s plea in verse 24 resonates with most Christ-followers at some points in their journey.

**Applications:** Jesus’ answer (in verse 29) reveals that prayer is not a magical incantation but a total openness to God’s action in and through us. Effective prayer is a continuous means of communicating with God, not simply an emergency procedure. What has helped you to make prayer a continuous communication in your life, rather than an “emergency” technique to control God?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you did not stay comfortable and safe while destructive forces were loose in the world you created. Give me the caring and courage to enlist as one of your servants, working with you to help those who hurt for any reason. Amen.

**The hard truth of servanthood and suffering**

**Wednesday, April 3**

**Scripture: Mark 9:30-37**

From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn’t want anyone to know it. This was because he was teaching his disciples, “The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up.” But they didn’t understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him. They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about during the journey?” They didn’t respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the

greatest. He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

**Observation:** Luke wrote specifically that Jesus "determined to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). But Mark made the same point. Jesus and his followers "went through Galilee" on their way south toward Jerusalem. As they moved toward what was, for Jesus, enemy territory, Jesus tried to teach them what lay ahead. But the disciples found that so hard to grasp that they argued about which of them would have the highest place in the earthly government they still thought Jesus would set up.

**Application:** N. T. Wright noted that Jesus' teaching was direct: "He is simply trying to tell them what he can see is going to happen. He will be handed over; he will be killed; he will rise again. Why couldn't they understand? Basically, because no such fate could possibly have been part of their game plan, their understanding of what a Messiah might do....nobody at all believed that, if and when God did send one, that Messiah would have to suffer, still less have to die." How do you keep your mind and heart open to however God works, whether it fits your expectations or not?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, how could there be "danger" or "risk" in coming to a big, popular church? But through that church, you call me to live above and beyond my culture's values and wishes. Give me the spine to keep following you. Amen.

**Whoever isn't against us is for us**

**Thursday, April 4**

**Scripture: Mark 9:38-50**

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone throwing demons out in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us." Jesus replied, "Don't stop him. No one who does powerful acts in my name can quickly turn around and curse me. Whoever isn't against us is for us. I assure you that whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will certainly be rewarded. "As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and to be thrown into the lake. If your hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than to go away with two hands into the fire of hell, which can't be put out. If your foot causes you to fall into sin, chop it off. It's better for you to enter life lame than to be thrown into hell with two feet. If your eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out. It's better for you to enter God's kingdom with one eye than to be thrown into hell with two. That's a place *where worms don't die and the fire never goes out*. Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? Maintain salt among yourselves and keep peace with each other."

**Observation:** Mark wrote that John said to Jesus, "We saw someone throwing demons out in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us." Yet Jesus characterized that as someone "who does powerful acts in my name." John seemed to want to keep the power contained and controlled, but apparently that didn't matter as much to Jesus. His greater concern was that no one cause any "little one" who believes in him to trip and fall into sin.

**Application:** It upset John that someone not “officially” with Jesus was casting out demons in his name. How do you understand the significance of Jesus’ words: “Whoever isn’t against us is for us”? Do you ever feel critical of Christians who think or act differently than you or your congregation? How can “whoever isn’t against us is for us” give clearer focus and more humility to your service for Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to follow you, no matter what the cost. Help me to chop off negative habits or thoughts, including the urge to judge those who serve you differently than I do. Amen.

## **In Judea, Jesus’ enemies began to test him**

**Friday, April 5**

### **Scripture: Mark 10:1-16**

Jesus left that place and went beyond the Jordan and into the region of Judea. Crowds gathered around him again and, as usual, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and, trying to test him, they asked, “Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife?” Jesus answered, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a divorce certificate and to divorce his wife.” Jesus said to them, “He wrote this commandment for you because of your unyielding hearts. At the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female. Because of this, a man should leave his father and mother and be joined together with his wife, and the two will be one flesh.* So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, humans must not pull apart what God has put together.” Inside the house, the disciples asked him again about this. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if a wife divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” People were bringing children to Jesus so that he would bless them. But the disciples scolded them. When Jesus saw this, he grew angry and said to them, “Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn’t welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.” Then he hugged the children and blessed them.

**Observation:** “Into the region of Judea” meant Jesus was getting close to Jerusalem. In that territory, he met more of his opponents. They tried to entangle him in a rabbinic debate over how to apply Deuteronomy 24:1. Some rabbis taught that Deuteronomy allowed divorce for any offense (even burning breakfast!). It was in the Bible, they said, so it must be what God wanted. But Jesus looked at the whole Bible, not just a verse here and there, and taught a higher, more loving ideal based on the creation story in Genesis 2.

**Application:** The Roman world around Israel scoffed at the idea that sex meant anything more than physical release. Jesus’ statement of the creation story’s ideal went against many people’s ideas, within Israel as well as beyond it. Later the apostle Paul taught Jesus’ ideal (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). In what ways does the idea of honoring God with your body run counter to much cultural thinking today about sex? What helps you “avoid sexual immorality”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you were on earth because of what the psalmist called your “steadfast love.” You lived out, in ways harder than I’ll ever have to, the idea of faithfulness. Help me live that way too. Amen.

## Eternal life is about more than possessions

Saturday, April 6

### Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. You know the commandments: *Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony.* Don’t cheat. *Honor your father and mother.*” “Teacher,” he responded, “I’ve kept all of these things since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions. Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, “It will be very hard for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom!” His words startled the disciples, so Jesus told them again, “Children, it’s difficult to enter God’s kingdom! It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.” They were shocked even more and said to each other, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them carefully and said, “It’s impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God.” Peter said to him, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “I assure you that anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms because of me and because of the good news will receive one hundred times as much now in this life—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment)—and in the coming age, eternal life. But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first.”

**Observation:** Jesus told the man who asked about eternal life, “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” The man went away sadly. He didn’t want eternal life THAT much. Then Jesus said, “It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.” That shocked his disciples—no rich people in heaven? No, said Jesus, that’s not the point: “All things are possible for God.” His hyperbolic statements were a solemn warning about the spiritual danger of worshipping wealth more than we worship God.

**Application:** To help us understand the specific focus of Jesus’ words, it’s important to remember that God did NOT tell every affluent person in the Bible to sell all they had (Abraham in the Old Testament or Zacchaeus in Luke 19). What was the heart issue Jesus wanted the young man to face up to? What made it so hard for him to respond to Jesus’ call? This story, including Jesus’ at first startling images, confronts us with the hard question, “Which of my possessions, if any, are so precious to me that I’d choose them over following Jesus?” We know how the young man answered the question, turning away from the “treasure in heaven” Jesus offered. Have you ever seriously wrestled with that question? How would you answer Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord God, all things are possible for you. Grow in me the wisdom to always value the eternal treasure you offer more highly than any of this earth’s temporary possessions. Amen.